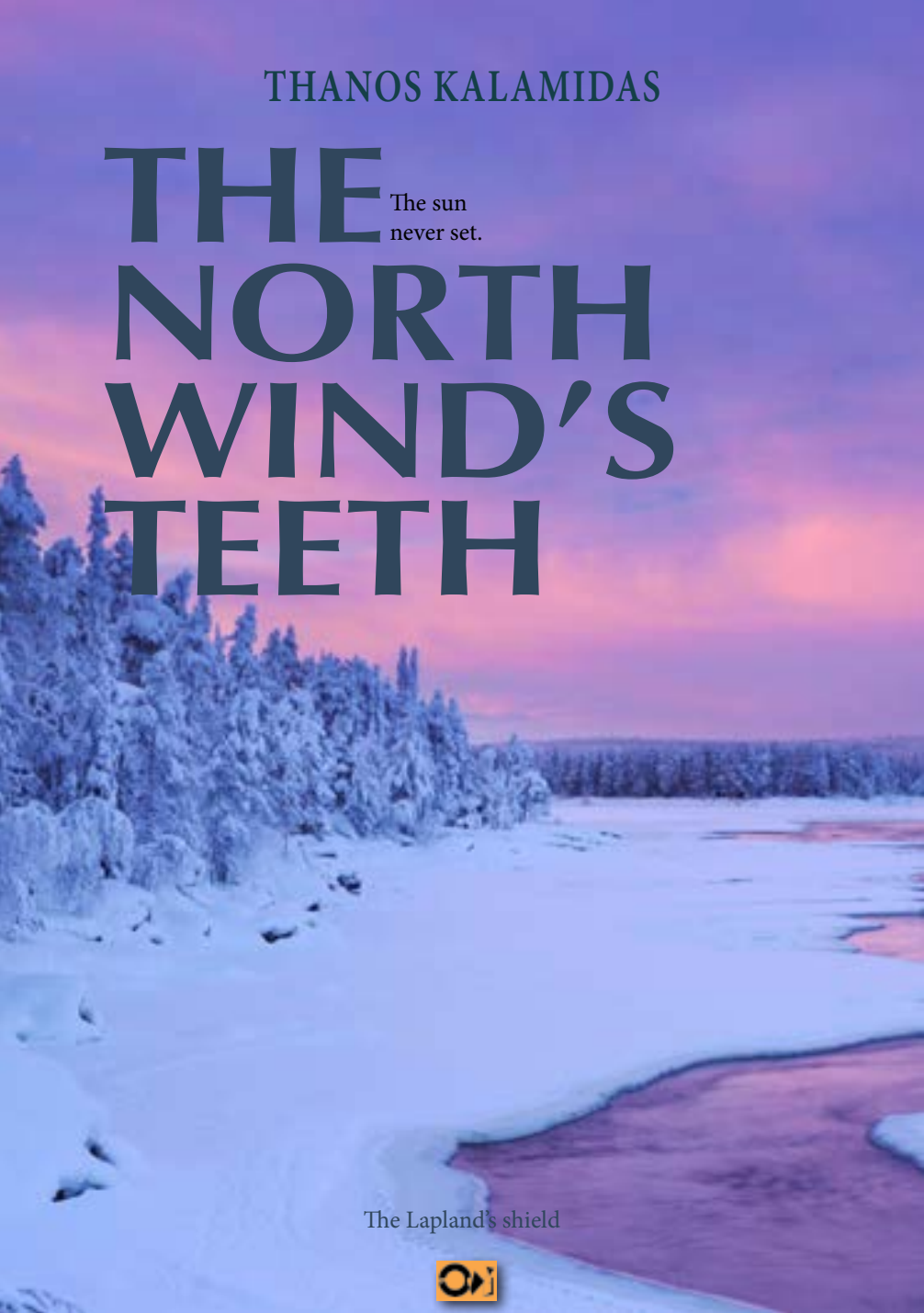
THANOS KALAMIDAS

THE NORTH WIND'S TEETH

The sun never set.



The Lapland's shield

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The north wind doesn't whisper in Lapland. It doesn't even talk. It bites down, right through to the bone, and then it keeps chewing. It was chewing on Nils Vartia as he knelt in the snow, his reindeer-skin coat a poor shield against its malice. The aurora borealis rippled overhead, a silent, green-and-violet cathedral ceiling, indifferent to the small, ugly scene unfolding beneath it.

Nils's hands, cracked and thick as birch roots, hovered over the still form of Aurinko, his prize bull. The animal's white coat, the colour of new snow, was marred by a patch of frozen vomit around its muzzle. Its sides, which should have been heaving with the steam of a healthy giant, were still. The eyes, usually the colour of dark, wild honey, were glazed and staring at the indifferent stars.

A guttural sound escaped Nils, something between a growl and a sob. He looked up. Across the frozen river that marked the invisible, shifting border between family grazing lands, a single light burned in the window of the Mäkelä winter hut. It was a steady, yellow eye, watching. Always watching.

He pulled his puukko knife from his belt, the blade whispering against the leather sheath. With a swift, practiced motion, he sliced a lock of hair from Aurinko's forelock and wrapped it around a piece of birch bark. He placed it in his pocket, a totem. A promise.

Nils rose, his knees cracking. He didn't look back at the light across the river. He didn't need to. The feud between the Vartias and the Mäkeläs was older than his grandfather's grandfather, a simmering stew of contested grazing rights, stolen brides, and the kind of grudges that outlasted the glaciers that carved this land. Now, it had a new ingredient.

Poison.

He began the long, silent walk back to his siida, the community his family had led for generations. Behind him, the north wind swept snow over

Aurinko's body, already beginning its work of erasing the evidence. But the wind couldn't erase what Nils Vartia now knew in his gut, the cold war was over. The real one was about to begin.

1.
The weight of neutrality

Killian Frank was elbow-deep in a recalcitrant snowmobile engine when Lotta started to sing.

It wasn't a howl. Lotta, a blue-eyed husky with the solemn dignity of a retired ballerina, only howled for emergencies. This was a low, insistent woo-woo-woo that she reserved for visitors who had the temerity to arrive unannounced. Killian wiped his hands on a rag, the scent of two-stroke oil clinging to his calloused palms, and stepped out of the small workshop attached to his cottage.

Twenty-five kilometres outside Luleå, the cottage was a squat, timbered affair that looked like it had been dropped by a careless giant and left to sink into the granite. It was his. It was quiet. It was the only

place he'd found where the ghosts of Berlin, the sirens, the chaos, the case that had broken him, couldn't find him. The ghost of his wife, Elina, was another matter. She was woven into the very grain of the timber, her Sami laugh still echoing in the whisper of the pines.

A dark blue Volvo, clean of the usual road salt, was picking its way up his unploughed drive. It parked beside his battered pickup, and the driver's door opened. The man who stepped out was not tall, but he was built like a mooring post. He wore a thick, hand-knitted sweater the colour of bog moss and his face was a map of deep lines, weathered by decades of arctic wind and worry.

Mikko Rautio. The Luleå police chief and one of the few men Killian would have trusted with his spare set of keys.

"Killian," Mikko said, his voice a low rumble that carried clearly in the crisp air. He didn't smile. Mikko never smiled on a case.

"Mikko. You're a long way from traffic violations and tourist complaints." Killian leaned against the doorframe, Lotta padding to his side, her tail giving a single, questioning wag.

"Not today." Mikko walked to the rear of his car and opened the boot. He pulled out a worn, leather-bound folder. "I need you to take a ride north. Toward the border. Near Junosuando."

Killian felt a familiar, unwelcome tightening in his chest. The old pull. The itch he'd scratched for fifteen years in the Kripo. He'd left it to bleed out here, in the silence. "I'm retired. Unofficially. Very unofficially."

"This is unofficial. And it's a mess." Mikko handed him the folder. "Nils Vartia found his best breeding bull dead yesterday morning. Poison, according to the preliminary vet report. This morning, he and two of his sons took chainsaws and cut down the border markers on the ice between his land and his neighbour's. Then they dragged them onto the Mäkelä family's front yard. When Antti Mäkelä came out, Nils told him, and I quote, 'Next time, it'll be your son's head on a post, not a marker.'"

Killian opened the folder. Inside were photographs of a magnificent white reindeer lying dead in the snow, a grainy shot of two men in heated argument in front of a traditional goahti and a map showing a tangle of land rights that looked like a bowl of spilled spaghetti. "This is a reindeer herding dispute," he said,

closing the folder. "It's a civil matter. A community matter. They have their own sameby board."

"The sameby board has been trying to mediate this for fifteen years. The regional prosecutor is asking me if this is murder or criminal mischief. The only thing everyone agrees on is that it's about to get a hell of a lot worse." Mikko's eyes, the pale blue of a winter sky, met Killian's. "You know the families. You know the land. You know how they think. You're the only person on both sides of that invisible border who everyone will even sit in the same room with."

"I'm a man with a dog, a broken engine, and a desire for peace," Killian said, but his hand was already closing around the folder. He thought of Elina, who had taught him that a Sami's herd was not property, it was a part of their soul. To poison a prize bull wasn't just vandalism. It was spiritual mutilation.

"Peace is a luxury we can't afford right now," Mikko said, turning to go. "Two families with twenty-thousand reindeer between them, a dozen sons and daughters with short tempers, and enough rifles to start a small war. I'm not asking you to solve it, Killian. I'm asking you to stop it from burning."

He got back into his Volvo. As he reversed down the drive, Lotta let out a single, sharp bark. Killian looked down at her. “I know,” he said. “He didn’t even stay for coffee. That’s how you know it’s serious.”

He looked at the folder, then at the northern horizon, where a smear of grey sky hinted at a coming storm. He went inside, not to make coffee, but to pack his overnight bag. He tucked Elina’s lávvu, a small, traditional Sami tent, into the sled he pulled behind his snowmobile, along with a rifle he hoped he wouldn’t need. Lotta jumped onto the seat behind him, her nose pointed north, already knowing the way.

2.
Lines in the snow

The journey north was a meditation on white. White sky, white ground, white trees that were mere suggestions of verticality in the monochrome. The snowmobile ate up the kilometres, its engine a steady, mechanical heartbeat against the vast silence. Killian's mind, however, was anything but silent.

The Vartias and the Mäkeläs. He'd known them for a decade. Nils Vartia was a traditionalist, a man who ran his herd with the GPS tracker in one hand and a handful of centuries-old lasso wisdom in the other. He was proud, stubborn, and his grief over his wife's

death five years ago had only calcified those traits. His sons, Pekka and Juhani, were cut from the same granite, though Juhani had a poet's sadness in his eyes that the reindeer herding life hadn't yet scoured away.

Antti Mäkelä was Nils's mirror image, but with a different reflection. Where Nils was rock, Antti was river ice, smooth, modern, and capable of crushing you if you stepped wrong. He'd invested heavily in snowmobiles, helicopters for herding, and a state-of-the-art slaughterhouse that processed not just his own herd but took contracts from smaller sameby groups. He was the future, he liked to say. Nils was the past, destined to be buried by it.

The flashpoint was the river. In winter, it was a highway. In summer, it was a legal labyrinth. The old markers, placed by their grandfathers with a handshake and a bottle of koskenkorva, had shifted with the changing course of the stream. Now, with the modern mapping that favoured Antti's more mobile operation, the disputed strip of land, barely two kilometres wide, was worth a fortune in lichen and grazing security.

Killian arrived at the Vartia siida as the short arctic day was bleeding into a long, purple twilight.

The cluster of buildings, a modern wooden house, several traditional goahtis and the vast, domed corral for the reindeer, looked like a fortress under siege. The reindeer themselves, thousands of them, milled restlessly in a vast enclosure, their antlers clacking like a field of nervous wind chimes.

He was met not by Nils, but by Juhani. The younger son, with his mother's softer features and a wool hat pulled down to his brows, stepped out of the main house. Lotta wagged her tail. Juhani had always had a way with dogs.

"Killian," Juhani said, his voice flat. "You are the policeman now?"

"I was never a policeman here," Killian said, dismounting. "I'm a friend who wants to make sure no one does something they can't take back."

"It's already done." Juhani gestured toward the house. "My father is inside. He is… not himself."

The tension inside was thick enough to slice. Nils sat at a worn wooden table, a cup of cold coffee in front of him. He looked up when Killian entered, his eyes red-rimmed, his hands, which had once expertly lassoed a thousand calves, trembling slightly. Pekka,

the elder son, stood by the window, his broad back a wall of silent fury.

"Mikko sent you," Nils said. It wasn't a question.

"He asked me to listen," Killian said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. He didn't offer condolences. He knew better. "Tell me about Aurinko."

Something flickered in Nils's eyes. Grief, yes, but something else. "He was the best. The bloodline goes back sixty years. My grandfather's best bull. He was not just an animal."

"Who found him?"

"I did. I went to check the boundary markers. The ones Antti has been pushing. When I came back, he was… down." Nils's voice cracked. "He had eaten something. The vet said it was a concentrated pesticide. Not something you find here. Something you'd have to order. Or bring in."

"So someone targeted him," Killian said.

"Who else?" Pekka spat from the window. "Who else has been trying to take our land, ruin our herd? Mäkelä wants this grazing land. With it, he controls the entire eastern migration route. Without Aurinko,

our breeding program is set back a decade. Who benefits?"

"That's what I'm here to find out," Killian said, keeping his voice even. "But cutting down markers and threatening a man's sons doesn't help. It gives Antti the moral high ground. It makes you look guilty."

"Guilty of what?" Nils's hand slammed on the table, making the cup rattle. "Defending what is mine? They are the poisoners! They are the thieves!"

"Then let me prove it," Killian said. He leaned forward, holding Nils's gaze. "Give me two days. No more actions. No more threats. Let me talk to Antti, let me ask questions. If I find proof, we go to the prosecutor. If I don't… then you can do what you want. But you will have lost nothing but two days."

The silence stretched, filled only by the crackle of a wood stove and the distant, restless clacking of the herd. Nils stared at him, the weight of generations in his eyes. Finally, he gave a single, curt nod. "Two days. Then the north wind takes its course."

Killian didn't ask what that meant. He had a feeling he already knew.

3.
The river of compromise

Antti Mäkelä's operation was a different world. The siida was a collection of prefab industrial buildings, clean and efficient, with a satellite dish pointed at the sky and a helicopter pad cleared of snow. The house itself was modern, all glass and timber, looking out over the contested river.

Killian was kept waiting outside for fifteen minutes. He didn't mind. The cold was bracing, and it gave Lotta a chance to sniff the air, which she did with growing suspicion, her hackles briefly rising. He noted a brand-new ATV, a high-end snowmobile, and a sleek black pickup truck with Finnish plates. Mäkelä was doing well.

When the door finally opened, it was not Antti who greeted him, but his daughter, Elina.

Killian's breath caught. The name was a small, sharp knife. But this Elina was not his Elina. She was young, perhaps twenty-five, with intelligent, wary eyes and dark hair braided tightly against her head. She wore high-end outdoor gear, the kind that cost more than Killian's snowmobile.

"Killian Frank," she said, her voice cool and precise. "My father will see you. The dog stays outside."

"The dog goes where I go," Killian said. "She's better company than most people."

A flicker of something, amusement, perhaps, crossed her face before she turned and led him inside. The interior was warm, sleek, and smelled of new furniture and coffee. Antti Mäkelä rose from a leather armchair. He was a handsome man, with a well-maintained beard and the easy confidence of someone used to being the biggest predator in the room.

"Killian," he said, extending a hand. "I heard you were the one to see when the police want a problem to disappear quietly."

“I don’t make problems disappear,” Killian said, shaking his hand. The grip was firm, brief, assessing. “I find out where they came from.”

“So Mikko is treating this as an investigation?” Antti gestured for him to sit, his expression carefully neutral. “Nils cuts down our markers, threatens my sons, and I am under investigation?”

“Nils’s prize reindeer was poisoned,” Killian said, remaining standing. “That’s a crime. Cutting down markers is vandalism. The two are connected. You see the problem.”

“I see Nils Vartia’s problem,” Antti said, his jaw tightening. “He’s a man being left behind. He refuses to modernise. He refuses to cooperate with the sameby board. His genetics are weak, and instead of admitting it, he invents an enemy.”

“Were you the enemy?” Killian asked.

Antti’s eyes hardened. “We had a disagreement over the boundary markers. It’s been to arbitration twice. He lost both times.”

"The old markers on the ice were cut down with his chainsaw," Killian said. "But the poison used on Aurinko was a specialised pesticide. The kind someone with a large-scale operation might have access to. For pest control in feed stores, perhaps."

The implication hung in the air. Elina, who had been standing by the window, went very still. Antti's face didn't change, but Killian saw the micro-shift in his posture, a subtle leaning back, a predator reassessing.

"I have no such pesticide," Antti said. "I can provide invoices for all my supplies. I am a businessman, Killian. A murderer? That is the talk of desperate, bitter old men." He stood up, the meeting clearly over. "You want to solve a mystery? Look at Nils's other enemies. He has made many. Or maybe… look closer to home."

Killian raised an eyebrow. "What does that mean?"

"It means a man who cries wolf is often hiding a fox in his own henhouse." Antti walked him to the door. "I've cooperated. Now, I expect you to tell Nils to stay off my land, or the next call I make won't be to Mikko Rautio. It will be to my lawyer in Helsinki."

As Killian stepped out, Lotta rose from her spot on the porch, giving a soft whine. Elina Mäkelä followed him out, closing the door behind her.

"You shouldn't be here," she said, her voice low. "You're walking a line, Mr. Frank. My father has a temper. So does Nils. People get hurt."

"They already have," Killian said. He studied her face. There was fear there, but also a conflict that went deeper than filial loyalty. "What do you think happened to Aurinko?"

She looked away, towards the river, where the last light was fading. "I think someone wanted to burn this whole thing down. And they didn't care who got caught in the fire." She turned and went back inside, leaving Killian with a dozen new questions and a cold knot of certainty in his stomach.

Someone was playing a very dangerous game. And the players were being pushed, not pulling their own strings.

4.
Ghosts in the herd

Killian didn't go back to Nils's siida immediately. Instead, he drove his snowmobile to a place he knew, a high ridge overlooking the disputed river valley. He set up Elina's lávvu, its pale canvas a small bloom against the snow, and built a fire. Lotta curled at his feet as the aurora began its silent dance.

He pulled out the folder Mikko had given him, but he didn't look at the photographs. He closed his eyes and let the facts run through his mind like a reel of film.

Fact: A prized bull was poisoned with a pesticide not commonly used in the area. It would have to be procured.
Fact: Nils Vartia reacted with spectacular, public rage.
Fact: Antti Mäkelä reacted with cool, lawyerly defiance.
Fact: The feud was old, but the stakes had just been raised exponentially.
Fact: Someone was lying.

He thought about Antti's parting words: 'Look closer to home.' It was a classic misdirection, but it was also a possibility he couldn't ignore. Nils had sons. Did they share his father's single-minded devotion to the old ways? Juhani had seemed distant, almost detached. Pekka was a coiled spring of rage. Could one of them have poisoned their own father's prize bull to force his hand into a final, violent confrontation with Mäkelä? It was reckless but rage often was.

He was drifting into a restless sleep when Lotta's low growl brought him bolt upright. The fire had died to embers. The aurora was gone, leaving only the deep, crushing black of a moonless arctic night. And somewhere out in that darkness, a snowmobile engine was idling.

It was a deliberate sound. Not someone passing by. Someone waiting.

Killian slowly reached for his rifle, his movements silent. He put a hand on Lotta's neck, feeling the vibration of her growl. The engine revved once, then twice, a signal. Then it cut out.

A voice came from the darkness. A woman's voice. "Mr. Frank? It's Elina Mäkelä. I need to talk. Alone."

He clicked on his headlamp. She was standing twenty metres away, her hands visible, no pack, no weapon that he could see. She was shivering, though her coat was good. He motioned her forward.

Inside the lávvu with the fire rekindled she sat across from him, accepting a cup of coffee from his thermos. Her hands shook, but it wasn't from the cold.

"My father is going to do something," she said. "Tonight or tomorrow. He has men coming. From Finland. They're not herders."

"What kind of men?"

"The kind who solve problems permanently. He's had enough of Nils's accusations. He's going to 'remove' the Vartias from the disputed land. Forcibly. He says if Nils wants a war, he'll give him one."

Killian's blood ran cold. "Why are you telling me this?"

She met his eyes, and for the first time, he saw the cracks in the cool facade. "Because I'm tired of it. I came back from university to help him modernise, to make things better. Instead, I've watched him become what he always accused Nils of being: a man

who thinks the land is his by right, not by trust." She paused. "And because I know who poisoned the reindeer."

The fire popped. Lotta's ears pricked forward.

"It wasn't my father," she said quickly. "He was furious when he heard. Not because of Nils's accusations, but because he knew it would force his hand, push him into the confrontation he's been wanting. He saw it as an opportunity."

"Who, then?"

She took a deep breath. "Pekka Vartia."

Killian stared at her. "You're telling me Nils's own son poisoned Aurinko?"

"I saw him," she said. "Three nights before the bull was found. I was checking one of our remote feed caches on the south bank. I saw a snowmobile cross the river near the old dead pine. No lights. I followed, just to see. He stopped near where the Vartia herd was grazing. I saw him pour something into a bucket and set it down. I didn't know what it was until I heard about Aurinko."

"Why would he do that?"

"To force his father's hand. Pekka is the firebrand. He's been pushing Nils to escalate for years. Nils held the line. Pekka knew that the one thing that would break his father's restraint was losing Aurinko. He wanted a war. And now he's about to get one."

Killian leaned back, the pieces shifting into a new, uglier configuration. A son, willing to destroy his family's future to satisfy his own lust for vengeance. And a rival, ready to use that act as a pretext for his own land grab. The two families were being steered toward a cliff by a man who was supposed to be on one of the ships.

"You have to stop them," Elina said, her voice urgent. "If my father's men cross the river tonight, someone will die. And Pekka will get exactly what he wants."

Killian was already moving. He banked the fire, collapsed the lávvu with practiced speed, and strapped it to the sled. "You go back. Say nothing. I'm going to Nils."

"He won't believe you," she said. "He'll never believe his own son would..."

"He'll believe me," Killian said, his voice grim. "Or he'll listen when I show him the proof."

He didn't have proof. Not yet. But he had a theory, a direction, and a desperate need to beat the clock. He roared off into the night, Lotta a white ghost at his back, the river valley a black chasm below him. The north wind had picked up, carrying the promise of a storm. And the promise of blood.

5.
The truth cuts deep

Killian arrived at the Vartia siida to find it in a state of low-grade, ominous activity. Lights were on in the main house and the workshop. The door to the house was unlocked.

He found Nils and Juhani in the kitchen, a map of the disputed land spread across the table. Pekka was conspicuously absent. Nils looked up, his face a mask of grim resolve.

"Two days aren't up," Killian said, closing the door behind him.

"No," Nils agreed. "But the situation has changed. We received word. Antti is bringing in men. Armed men. They will be on our land by dawn."

“I know,” Killian said. “Where’s Pekka?”

Nils and Juhani exchanged a glance. Juhani’s face was pale. “He went to check the herd. To move them further inland, away from the river.”

“He went alone?” Killian asked. “In the middle of the night?”

“He is my son,” Nils said, a challenge in his voice. “He is a man.”

“He’s a man who poisoned Aurinko.”

The words fell into the room like a grenade. Nils went rigid. Juhani’s face crumpled, and Killian knew, in that instant, that he hadn’t been the only one who suspected.

“You lie,” Nils whispered, but there was no force behind it. It was the reflex of a father’s heart, not the conviction of a man’s mind.

“Elina Mäkelä saw him,” Killian said, keeping his voice low. “Three nights before. Crossing the river, no lights. She saw him put out a poisoned bait. She didn’t know what it was until after.”

“Elina Mäkelä,” Nils spat, grasping for the familiar hatred. “The daughter of a snake.”

"She came to me tonight because her father is about to start a war, and she doesn't want blood on her hands," Killian said. "I think you don't want your son's hands covered in it, either. Think, Nils. Think about the last few months. Has Pekka been pushing for confrontation? Has he been talking about ending this 'once and for all'?"

Nils sat down heavily, his hand reaching for the table to steady himself. Juhani didn't look at his father. He stared at the map, his jaw working.

"He has," Juhani said, his voice barely a whisper. "He's been… different. Since mother died. He blamed the Mäkeläs. He said they were taking everything. That father was too weak to stop them."

Nils made a sound, a low groan of a wounded animal. "He would not… he could not…"

"He did," Killian said. "And now he's out there, 'checking the herd,' while your enemy is mobilising. Or maybe he's not checking the herd at all. Maybe he's going to meet Antti's men. Maybe he wants to be the spark that lights the fire."

The implication hit Nils like a physical blow. He looked at Killian, the full, terrible weight of it in his

eyes. His son, the incendiary, was not just a traitor to the family. He was about to become a martyr to his own cause. If he was caught by Antti's men on the disputed land, alone, armed, it would be all the provocation Antti needed. And Nils, honour-bound to defend his son, would be drawn in.

"We have to get to him first," Killian said. "Before Antti's men do. You can stop this, Nils. But you have to move now."

Nils rose. The trembling in his hands had stopped. In its place was a terrible, cold clarity. He looked at Juhani. "Get the snowmobiles. The two fastest." He looked at Killian. "You will come with us. You will be the witness. To whatever we find."

Killian nodded. There was no time for anything else.

6.
Fire on the ice

The race across the frozen river was a blur of white and black. Nils led, his snowmobile a roaring beast that carved through the darkness with a single piercing headlight. Juhani was behind him, and Killian brought up the rear, Lotta pressed against his back, her presence a grounding weight.

They found Pekka's snowmobile first, parked near a cluster of boulders that marked a traditional gathering place, a spot that was, according to the modern survey maps, well within the disputed zone. There were fresh tracks leading away from it, not towards the Vartia herd, but toward the Mäkelä side of the river.

And there were other tracks. Multiple snowmobiles. Converging from the south.

Nils killed his engine, and the sudden silence was deafening. Killian pulled up beside him, cutting his own motor. The three of them stood in the darkness, listening. Lotta's nose was up, her body tense.

Then they heard it. Voices. Shouting. Angry, guttural Finnish. And one voice, younger, higher, shouting back in Sami: "This is our land! You have no right!"

"Pekka," Nils breathed. He started forward, but Killian grabbed his arm.

"Wait," Killian hissed. "Listen."

A new voice cut through the argument. Calm. Deliberate. Antti Mäkelä. "Your land? The markers are gone, boy. This is my land now. And you are trespassing. Armed. What do you think a judge will say about that?"

"I know what you did!" Pekka's voice was wild, cracking. "I know about the poison! You think I don't know? You think you can destroy us and we'll just..."

"I destroyed nothing," Antti said, his voice hardening. "But you? You're about to destroy yourself. I've got witnesses. You're on my land, with a rifle, making threats. It's a clear case of self-defence if you try anything."

Killian's mind raced. Antti was setting a trap. He was goading Pekka into a violent act, or manufacturing the appearance of one. If Pekka raised his rifle, Antti's men would have all the justification they needed to shoot him. And with the feud as background, who would question it?

"We have to go in," Killian whispered to Nils. "All of us. Together. He can't claim self-defence against three unarmed men. And he can't afford to have a neutral witness."

Nils's face was carved from ice. He nodded once. He pulled his *puukko* from his belt and handed it to Killian. "Hold this. I will go to my son."

They walked forward, the snow crunching under their boots, their approach no longer silent. A flashlight beam swung toward them, catching them in its glare.

"Who goes?" Antti's voice, sharp now.

“Nils Vartia,” Nils called out, his voice steady. “And witnesses.”

They emerged into a small clearing. Pekka stood with his back to a boulder, a rifle held across his chest, not raised but not lowered. His face was wild, streaked with tears of rage and fear. Opposite him stood Antti, flanked by two large men in dark snowsuits. Antti had a pistol in a hip holster, his hand resting casually on the butt.

“This is a family matter, Nils,” Antti said, his eyes narrowing. “Your son is trespassing. Armed. Threatening me.”

“He is a boy who lost his mother and is about to do something very stupid,” Nils said. He walked past Antti as if he weren’t there, and stood in front of his son. “Pekka. Put the rifle down.”

“Father, he...” Pekka started, his voice trembling.

“I know,” Nils said. His voice was not angry. It was the voice of a man who had spent his life calming panicked reindeer, of a father who had soothed a thousand childhood fears. It was the voice of a man who was utterly, completely heartbroken. “I know what you did. We will talk about it. But now, you put the rifle down, and we go home.”

The words hit Pekka like a physical blow. The rage in his face crumbled, replaced by a raw, childlike shame. He looked from his father to Juhani, to Killian, and finally to Antti, who watched with cold, predatory satisfaction. The truth was out. The mask was off.

With a sob, Pekka lowered the rifle. He let it fall into the snow.

Antti took a step forward. "He threatened me. I want him arrested."

"For what?" Killian said, stepping into the light. "Standing on a piece of land you can't legally prove is yours until the arbitration is finalised next month? Shouting at you? You brought armed men across the ice. You're the one who looks like you're about to commit a felony."

Antti's eyes flickered to Killian, and for a moment, the mask slipped. There was fury there, but also calculation. He knew Killian wasn't a cop, but he was a witness. And witnesses were inconvenient.

"This isn't over," Antti said, his voice low and venomous. He looked at Nils. "Your son poisoned your own reindeer. Your heir. What does that say

about your family? About your right to lead? I will have your grazing rights. I will have it all. And there's nothing you can do to stop me."

He turned and strode back to his snowmobile, his men following. The engines roared to life and within moments, they were gone, swallowed by the darkness.

The silence that remained was heavier than any storm. Nils stood with his son, his hand on Pekka's shoulder. The young man's body was wracked with silent sobs.

Juhani looked at Killian, his eyes full of a grief that mirrored his father's. "What happens now?"

Killian looked at the sky, where the first flakes of the promised snow were beginning to fall. "Now," he said, "we go home. And you deal with this. Your way."

He picked up the fallen rifle, unloaded it, and handed it to Nils. The old man took it without a word, his eyes never leaving his son's face. The north wind howled, sweeping the snow across the fresh tracks, already beginning the long work of covering the night's work.

But some things, Killian knew, could not be covered. They would fester, like a wound left open to the cold.

7.
The weight of blood

The Vartia siida was quiet in the grey light of dawn. The storm had come and gone, leaving a fresh, pristine layer of snow that muffled sound and softened edges. Inside the main house, however, there was no softness.

They sat around the same table where Killian had first spoken with Nils. The map was gone. In its place was a single, empty cup of coffee, and the unspoken truth that sat between them like a block of ice.

Pekka had confessed. It had taken Nils less than ten minutes to pull it from him, using a combination of paternal authority and the simple, devastating evidence of his own eyes. The empty pesticide container, ordered online under a false name, had been found in the engine compartment of his snowmobile.

He had done it to force his father's hand. He had believed, with the twisted logic of grief and rage, that if Nils was pushed far enough, he would finally crush Antti Mäkelä by whatever means necessary. He hadn't cared about the reindeer. He hadn't cared about the herd. He had only cared about the war.

Now, he sat slumped in a chair, his face buried in his hands. Nils stood by the window, his back to the room, looking out at the herd that now had no future leader.

"The sameby board will have to be told," Nils said, his voice hollow. "The prosecutor. Pekka will have to answer for what he did."

"Father, no," Juhani said, the first words he had spoken in an hour. "He's family. He made a mistake. A terrible mistake but..."

"He poisoned Aurinko," Nils said, turning. His face was ancient, etched with lines that hadn't been there yesterday. "He destroyed our bloodline. He betrayed us. To make war on a man who is not our enemy, but our rival. There is a difference, Juhani. I tried to teach you both that. One you can live with. The other destroys you from the inside."

“And what about Antti?” Juhani shot back, frustration breaking through his grief. “He was ready to kill Pekka! He brought armed men! He’s going to use this to take our land anyway!”

“Let him,” Nils said, and the words were so quiet, so final, that they silenced the room. He looked at Killian. “You saw. You heard. Tell the sameby what happened here. Tell the police. I will not defend my son’s actions. But I will also not let Antti Mäkelä use them as an excuse for his own. The arbitration will proceed. The markers will be replaced. And I will lead my people as I always have: with the law, not above it.”

He walked to his son and stood over him. “Pekka. Look at me.”

Slowly, Pekka raised his head. His eyes were red, his face a ruin of shame.

“You are banished,” Nils said. The word fell with the weight of a death sentence. “From the herd. From the siida. You will go south. You will find work. You will live your life, and you will think, every day, about what you have done. In five years, if you have learned humility, perhaps we will speak. But not before.”

Pekka didn't argue. He didn't plead. He simply rose, walked to the door and paused. He looked back at his father, at Juhani, and then at Killian. His gaze held no anger, only a profound, bottomless regret.

He left. The door closed. And the silence that followed was the sound of a family breaking.

Killian stood. "I'll go to Luleå. I'll give my statement to Mikko. I'll tell him what Elina told me, what I saw. The whole truth."

Nils nodded, not turning from the window. "Tell him also that the Vartia herd will not cross the disputed line until the arbitration is finalised. I will give him that in writing. Antti wants peace? He can have it. But he will have it with my terms."

Killian looked at Juhani, who sat motionless, staring at the empty chair his brother had just vacated. The weight of the future was settling on his shoulders. The herd, the feud, the legacy, it was all his now.

Killian stepped out into the cold. Lotta was waiting, her nose lifted to the pale sky. He loaded her onto the snowmobile and took one last look at the Vartia siida. It stood against the white expanse, a collection of small, stubborn shapes, holding on.

He thought of Elina, who had betrayed her father to prevent a war. He thought of Pekka, who had burned his own world down out of grief. He thought of Nils, who had sacrificed his son to save his soul.

There were no winners here. Only degrees of loss.

He started the engine and headed south, the wind at his back, the truth a cold weight in his chest. The case was closed. But the wounds it had opened would take generations to heal.

8.
The north remembers

Three weeks later, the arctic spring was a promise rather than a reality. The sun lingered a little longer each day, the snow took on a crystalline, wet sheen and the reindeer began their slow, instinctual migration toward the calving grounds.

Killian sat on his porch, a cup of coffee warming his hands, Lotta's head resting on his knee. Mikko Rautio's Volvo was a familiar sight coming up the drive. This time, the chief had a smile on his face. It was a small, tired smile, but a smile nonetheless.

He got out, carrying a paper bag. "Coffee?"

"Already have some," Killian said, gesturing to his cup. "But I won't say no to whatever pastry you've got in that bag."

Mikko sat on the step beside him, pulling out two sticky pullat, cardamom buns. He handed one to Killian. “The prosecutor’s office filed charges against Pekka Vartia today. Animal cruelty, trespassing. He’ll likely get a suspended sentence and community service.”

“And the Mäkelä side?”

“Antti is facing charges of his own. Organised intimidation, illegal transport of firearms across the Finnish border. His men talked. They’re getting off lighter in exchange for testimony. His daughter’s statement helped.” Mikko took a bite of his bun. “The arbitration on the grazing land is proceeding. Nils Vartia’s concession has been noted. It’s… put him in a stronger position, actually. Antti looks like the aggressor now.”

“Funny how that works,” Killian said. “The truth comes out, and the bad guy looks bad.”

“The sameby board is recommending a joint herding agreement for the disputed land. Shared use, rotating seasons. Like the old days.” Mikko looked at him. “You did that. You kept the peace.”

"I didn't do anything," Killian said. "Nils Vartia did the hard part. He chose his integrity over his son. That's not peacekeeping. That's just… being a man."

"A man who listened to you," Mikko said. He finished his bun and brushed the crumbs from his lap. "The families won't forget that. Neither will I."

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching the sun crawl across the sky. Lotta dozed, her nose twitching in dog-dreams.

"Elina Mäkelä called me," Mikko said finally. "She's moving back to the siida. Taking over the modernisation projects. But she's also talking to Juhani Vartia about a joint venture. A cooperative slaughterhouse and marketing brand. Sami-owned, representing both families."

Killian raised an eyebrow. "Now that's a twist."

"The young," Mikko said with a philosophical shrug. "They find new ways around old walls. Maybe that's the only way through."

He stood, brushing snow from his trousers. "I should go. I have a budget meeting. A joy I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy."

Killian walked him to his car. As Mikko opened the door, he paused. “You know, you could come back. Officially. I could use a consultant. A special investigator. The county council would approve the budget.”

Killian shook his head slowly. “No. This was a one-time favour. I’m not looking for a badge, Mikko. I’m looking for peace.”

“Peace,” Mikko repeated, looking north. “In Lapland? That’s a luxury.”

“Then I’ll settle for quiet,” Killian said.

Mikko got in his car and drove away. Killian stood for a long moment, watching the dust rise from the road, then settle back onto the snow. He thought of Elina and Juhani, the children of enemies, building something new. He thought of Pekka, exiled and shamed, starting over in a city that didn’t care about reindeer or bloodlines. He thought of Nils, alone now, leading his people with a new, painful wisdom.

He went back inside. He didn’t look at the folder Mikko had left. He put it on a shelf, next to a photograph of Elina Frank, her smile as bright as the arctic sun. He didn’t need to read the details anymore. He had lived them.

Lotta padded over and nudged his hand. He scratched behind her ears. "Come on," he said. "That engine isn't going to fix itself."

He walked out to the workshop, the cold air filling his lungs, the smell of pine and snow and something else, something old and enduring, wrapping around him. The north wind had done its worst. It had blown through the lives of two families, stripping away pretence, leaving only the bare bones of truth. And now, slowly, carefully, they would rebuild.

It was the way of things here. The land was unforgiving, but it was also patient. It would wait. It would remember. And in the end, it would endure.

Just like the people who called it home.

THE END

The north wind's teeth
The Lapland's shield

Thanos Kalamidas

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi magazine
Design: Thanos

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THANOS KALAMIDAS

THE NORTH WIND'S TEETH

The sun never set.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

The Lapland's shield